

Southeast Asia AI Brief

What happened in AI across Cambodia and the region, and what it means for you. Covering 8 September – 2 October 2026.



THE SHORT VERSION

- Cambodia is pairing an industrial AI push with a clear message from the Prime Minister: learn AI, but don't let it do your thinking.
- ASEAN is lining up a regional AI policy, expected after the Digital Economy Framework Agreement is signed in November.
- Rules are becoming real: Vietnam's AI law gives existing AI systems until 1 March 2027 to comply, about five months from now.

FOCUS Cambodia

Cambodia pushes AI for industry, with China as a key partner

At the Global Industrial Internet Conference in Shenyang (8–10 September), Cambodia set out plans to modernise its industry with AI and industrial internet systems. It is seeking deeper cooperation with China on industrial AI applications, applied research, technology transfer and workforce training.^[1]

Why it matters: demand for people who can apply AI in factories, logistics and operations is likely to grow faster than for pure software roles.

Prime Minister: use AI, but set rules and keep thinking for yourself

Speaking at a graduation ceremony for more than 2,000 Asia Euro University students, Prime Minister Hun Manet urged universities to set clear guidelines for AI rather than ban it, and warned that students who rely only on AI risk becoming "hollow" graduates. "Do not ask AI everything," he said.^[2]

Why it matters: expect Cambodian universities to publish AI-use policies. Employers will value graduates who can show both AI skills and their own judgment.

Cambodia at the UNESCO forum on AI ethics

A delegation led by Seng Sopheap, President of the Cambodia Academy of Digital Technology (CADT), took part in UNESCO's 4th Global Forum on the Ethics of AI in Riyadh (14–17 September).^[3]

Why it matters: Cambodia is aligning with international norms on responsible AI, which tends to shape future national rules.

REGION**Across Southeast Asia****ASEAN moves toward a regional AI policy**

A trade official said on 18 September that a regional AI policy is likely once the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA), which covers cooperation on AI and emerging technologies, is signed in November 2026.^[4]

Why it matters: a shared framework could make it easier to sell AI products across ASEAN markets.

China and ASEAN showcase 31 joint AI projects

At a China-ASEAN business summit on 17 September, organisers released case studies of 31 AI cooperation projects covering all 11 ASEAN member states. A China-ASEAN AI application centre says it has catalogued more than 1,000 potential AI use cases and backed over 30 cross-border projects.^[5]

Vietnam's AI law: compliance deadlines are getting close

Vietnam's AI law, the region's first comprehensive risk-based AI framework, has been in force since 1 March 2026. AI systems that already existed must comply by 1 March 2027, or by 1 September 2027 in health, education and finance.^[6]

Why it matters: companies serving Vietnamese customers should start their compliance review now.

Malaysia staffs up its national AI office

Malaysia is implementing its National AI Action Plan 2026–2030, and AI Malaysia announced its inaugural board of directors on 11 September.^[7]

Waymo picks Singapore as its first Southeast Asian market

Waymo announced in mid-September that it plans to launch robotaxi services in Singapore by 2028.^[8]

MONEY**Funding****Southeast Asian startup funding is dominated by AI infrastructure**

Startups in the region raised USD 7.25 billion in the first half of 2026, but a single USD 4.5 billion data-centre financing for Singapore's DayOne made up 62% of the total, according to Kickstart Ventures.^[9]

Why it matters: outside infrastructure, funding is still scarce. Early-stage founders should plan to reach revenue early rather than count on large rounds.

FOR YOU**What this means****Students**

Learn AI tools properly, and keep your own reasoning visible in your work. That combination is what universities and employers are starting to ask for.

Founders

Regional rules are forming. Build with data protection and transparency in mind from day one, and aim for revenue before fundraising.

Companies

Industrial AI is a national priority. Start with a clear internal AI policy and one practical pilot, and check Vietnam's deadlines if you operate there.

What is Catalyst AI Academy?

Catalyst AI Academy teaches practical AI skills across Southeast Asia, from its base in Phnom Penh. Students, founders and company teams learn AI tools by building a real project with a coach, in short workshops, sprints and longer programs. For companies, we also build AI automations and train teams to use AI safely and productively.

News from Catalyst

- **21 September:** we ran a Design Thinking Workshop at RMIT University Vietnam's Saigon South campus in Ho Chi Minh City.
- **New partners:** Proseth Informatics and Macro Solutions have joined Catalyst AI Academy as partners.
- **Coming up:** Simplified AI Governance, a one-day workshop for decision-makers on using AI safely at work, with Proseth Informatics in Phnom Penh. Date to be announced; [register your interest](#).

[See upcoming courses](#)[Contact us](#)

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Read more

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2. Khmer Times, "Prime Minister Hun Manet calls for AI adoption with caution on student learning". <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/502034698/prime-minister-hun-manet-calls-for-ai-adoption-with-caution-on-student-learning>
3. CADT, "Cambodian Delegation Participates in the 4th UNESCO Global Forum on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence 2026". <https://cadt.edu.kh/cambodian-delegation-participates-in-the-4th-unesco-global-forum-on-the-ethics-of-artificial-intelligence-gfeai-2026-in-riyadh-saudi-arabia/>
4. SunStar, "Asean regional AI policy eyed amid digital economy pact signing". <https://www.sunstar.com.ph/cebu/asean-regional-ai-policy-eyedamid-digital-economy-pact-signing>
5. The Manila Times, "AI takes spotlight at China-Asean Expo 2026", 23 September 2026. <https://www.manilatimes.net/2026/09/23/tmt-newswire/ai-takes-spotlight-at-china-asean-expo-2026/2430467>
6. Allen & Gledhill, "Vietnam's new Law on Artificial Intelligence: risk-based regulatory framework in force 1 March 2026". <https://www.allenandgledhill.com/vn/publication/articles/32667/s-new-law-on-artificial-intelligence-risk-based-regulatory-framework-in-force-1-march-2026>
7. AI Malaysia (National AI Office). <https://ai.gov.my/>
8. Fortune, "Waymo to launch robotaxis in Singapore, its first Southeast Asia market, by 2028", 17 September 2026. <https://fortune.com/2026/09/17/waymo-launch-robotaxis-singapore-first-southeast-asia-market/>
9. TNGlobal, "DayOne's \$4.5B round drives Southeast Asia startup funding to \$7.25B in H1: Kickstart Ventures", 24 September 2026. <https://technode.global/2026/09/24/dayones-4-5b-round-drives-southeast-asia-startup-funding-to-7-25b-in-h1-kickstart-ventures/>

Further reading: The Diplomat, "Will Southeast Asia Actually Benefit From Its AI Boom?" (September 2026). This brief is produced by Catalyst AI Academy with AI-assisted research and reviewed by our team before publication.